

[A Wilder Rose: Rose's Biography](#)

by Susan Wittig Albert



Figure 1: Rose, Spring Valley MN

Rose Wilder Lane lived one of those hard-to-believe lives. She was born in 1886 in a Dakota Territory claim shanty to Laura and Almanzo Wilder. The family gave up Plains wheat farming because of illness and crop failures and made a series of moves: to Minnesota (where Rose's photo was taken), Florida, South Dakota, and finally (in 1894) to a hardscrabble Ozark hill country farm near Mansfield MO. Laura named the small farm Rocky Ridge.

Rose was bright and quick, an eager reader with an excellent memory who devoured every book that came within her reach. But it wasn't just her intelligence that set her apart: she was marked, she felt, by the family's poverty, and always felt herself an outsider. She went to school in Mansfield, then to high school in Crowley, LA, where she lived with her father's sister, Eliza Jane Wilder Thayer. She returned briefly to Mansfield and in 1904, not yet eighteen, took the train to Kansas City to become a telegrapher.



Figure 2: Rose at high school graduation



Figure 3: Rose at Hetch Hetchy Reservoir

In 1909, Rose moved to San Francisco and went to work as a writer/reporter for the *San Francisco Call*. There, she married Gillette Lane. Their child, a son, was born in 1910 but did not live, and the Lanes spent the next year or so working on promotional schemes involving newspaper subscription services. Back in California in 1911, they sold real estate until the War brought the market down and Rose went to work for the *San Francisco Bulletin*. Over the next three years, she produced literally hundreds of articles, feature stories (like her reporting on Hetch Hetchy) and serials. Several of her newspaper serials—stories about Henry Ford, Charlie Chapman, aviator Art Smith, and Jack London—were published as books, as well. She also wrote a semi-autobiographical novel, *Diverging Roads*. In 1918, Rose and Gillette Lane were divorced.

Rose left the *Bulletin* in 1918 and began her freelance career with magazine articles, a ghostwriting project (*White Shadows on the South Seas*), and a book, *The Making of Herbert Hoover*. The war over, she was recruited by the American Red Cross to travel and write articles about the organization's relief efforts. Her stories, published in national magazines and newspapers, became very popular, as was her book about her travels in Albania, *The Peaks of Shala* (1923). She went back to the States for a year, then in 1926, she returned to Albania accompanied by her friend Helen (Troub) Boylston. The two rented a villa in Tirana and Rose wrote for such magazines as *Country Gentleman*, *McCall's*, *Harper's Monthly*, and *Ladies Home Journal*. One of her stories won an O. Henry prize; a serial, "Cindy,"



Figure 4: Rose in the Loire Valley, France

earned her \$10,000 and was published as a book. During this time, Rose assumed responsibility for the formal education of an Albanian boy, Rexh Meta, whom she had met in 1921. With her encouragement and financial support, Rexh later attended Cambridge.



Figure 5: The Rock House Rose built for her parents

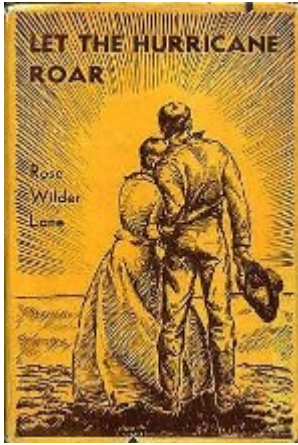
Through the 1920s, Rose had supported her parents with an annual \$500 "subsidy," but she became increasingly concerned about their health. She returned to Rocky Ridge in 1928 (Almanzo was 71, Laura 61) and built them a small modern retirement home. She and Helen—who later authored the series, *Sue Barton, Nurse*—settled into a pleasant life in the farmhouse. Rose continued her work for the magazines, documenting her activities in her Line-a-Day Diary and in various journals. But this comfortable life was interrupted in late 1929 by the Crash and then by the Depression. Rose, Helen, and Laura lost the money they had in the stock market and the magazines stopped buying.

It was a challenging time for writers around the country.

In May, 1930, Laura brought Rose a bundle of roughly-drafted handwritten pages titled "Pioneer Girl." Rose revised this, to be marketed as an adult serial. Then she pulled out a 22-page section, called it "When Grandma Was a Little Girl," and sent it to her friend, Berta Hader, as a possible children's book. This piece, expanded and rewritten, was eventually published by Harper & Brothers as *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932). This book introduced the eight-book *Little House* series, based on Laura's "Pioneer Girl" and coauthored by Laura and Rose. "Pioneer Girl" itself has never been published.

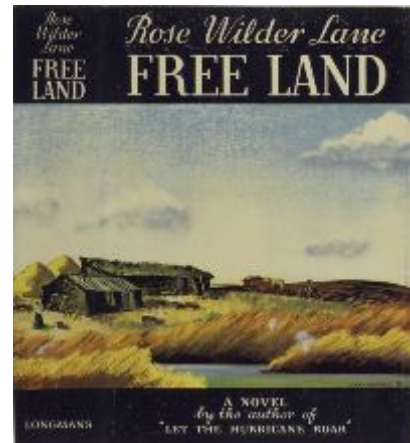


Figure 6: Rose at her typewriter

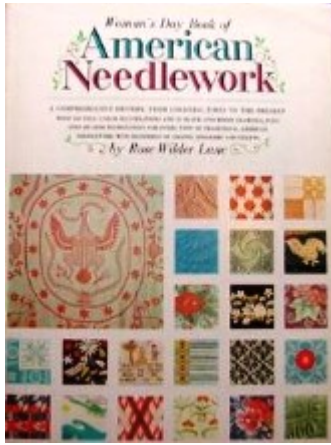


During the years (1930-1935) Rose lived at Rocky Ridge, she produced many published short stories and two books, *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1933), and *Old Home Town* (1935). The economic woes of those years were intensified by the hot, dry weather that produced Dust Bowl conditions in neighboring states. Helen left to find work on the East Coast, and Rose took in two teenage boys, supporting them through their high school years. In the summer of 1935, she left the farm and moved to Columbia to research a book on Missouri and continue her magazine writing. Two years later, she moved to New York, where she wrote *Free Land*, her best-known work. During these years, Laura's letters to Rose document Rose's co-authorship of the later books in the *Little House* series. To the end of their days, neither Laura nor Rose ever acknowledged the extent of Rose's contributions.

Rose used some of the money from the sale of *Free Land* to purchase a small house and acreage just outside of Danbury, CT. She moved there and began to make substantial improvements, a project that would continue until her death. Her writing, too, took a different turn. During FDR's first term, she had developed a deep distrust of the New Deal and its many government programs, and in 1936, when Roosevelt was running for a second term, she wrote "Credo," a statement of her belief in individual liberty. Published in 1937 in the *Post*, it was immediately popular and was quickly brought out as a pamphlet entitled *Give Me Liberty*. Finding her voice as a writer of political and economic philosophy, Rose wrote a number of antiwar magazine articles (1938-1941) and a book, *The Discovery of Freedom: Man's Struggle Against Authority*. It was published in 1943—in the same year as Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead* and Isabel Paterson's *God of the Machine*—and became an underground classic. Rose, Rand, and Paterson are often spoken of as the three "mothers" of the Libertarian party. Rose quickly found another outlet for her political writings. From 1942-1945, she published wrote a weekly column, "Rose Lane Says," in the widely-read African-American newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*. Three typical titles: "Americans Must Once Again Learn that Freedom is Self-Control, Responsibility"; "Capitalism Has Led the Economic Advance of These United States;" and "Controlled Society or Planned Economy Leads to Slavery."*



In 1945, Rose left the *Courier* for the post of editor of the National Economic Council's monthly *Review of Books*. Always a voracious reader, she was now in a position to support books that she considered timely and important. She stayed in this post until the Council decided to bring its employees under the Social Security system, which Rose vehemently deplored. She left in protest. To the end of her life, she refused to accept a Social Security number or benefits.



Rose had a continuing relationship with editor Eileen Tighe at *Woman's Day*, where she had written a series of needlework articles in 1942. (Needlework had always been her passion.) In the early sixties, Tighe invited her to reprise and expand this series; the result was *The Woman's Day Book of American Needlework* (1963). Two years later, Tighe asked Rose to go to Vietnam to write an article for the magazine, and Rose accepted. She was seventy-nine years old. The story she wrote, "August in Viet Nam," was about the beautiful land and the beautiful people and their fight for freedom.

Rose was planning to celebrate her eightieth birthday with a trip to Europe, her first travel abroad since the long-ago return to Rocky Ridge in 1928, forty years before. She would sail from New York on November 9, planning to go first to England and then to Sweden, where a newly purchased Volvo sedan was waiting for her. But she didn't get to make the trip. She died in her sleep on October 30, 1968.

Rose's papers were donated to the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library by Roger Lea MacBride, whom she thought of as her "adopted grandson." William Holtz, her biographer, used this material for his 1993 book *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane*, on which this brief biography and my novel, *A Wilder Rose*, are based. In addition to relying on the work of Holtz and other scholars, I transcribed and studied the Line-A-Day diaries that Rose kept during the years she spent working on the books that were published in her mother's name and which are available at the Hoover Library. They clearly establish, once and for all, the extent of her contribution to the Little House series.

Read Rose's autobiographical sketch, from the Works Progress Administration's Library of Congress Folklore Project (1938-39), on [this page](#).

* I am indebted to researcher Nancy Cleaveland for her outstanding bibliographic work.